

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today criticized the criminal convictions of Andrei Erofeev and Yuri Samodurov for insulting the feelings of religious believers through a Moscow art show they organized in 2007. A Moscow court imposed fines totaling more than \$10,000 on the two defendants.

USCIRF Chair Leonard Leo stated: “Though some might find these paintings highly and gratuitously offensive and devoid of any meaningful social or cultural value, it is wrong under international human rights standards to criminalize religiously defamatory or offensive expression.” Mr. Leo continued: “While society can and should criticize this kind of demeaning expression toward religions, legal prohibitions—and criminal sanctions especially—have no place.”

Chairman Leo said: “Freedom of thought, conscience or religion necessarily involves the right to question, challenge, or criticize religions. We could argue about whether it is courteous or appropriate to use exaggerated imagery, whether cartoons or paintings, to make these points, but it should not be criminalized.”

USCIRF has long maintained that laws prohibiting and punishing the defamation of religions—including blasphemy laws and bans on incitement of religious hatred—violate international standards under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, among other human rights instruments. As documented in successive USCIRF annual reports, laws against blasphemy or insulting religious feelings allow authoritarian governments and powerful majorities to suppress or punish expression with which they disagree, often resulting in violations of minorities’ and dissenters’ internationally-protected human rights.

The art exhibition at issue included one piece that placed Mickey Mouse’s head on the body of Christ and a second piece that placed the image of Christ alongside a Coca Cola bottle with the statement, “This is my blood.”

For more information on religious freedom conditions in Russia and USCIRF’s recommendations for U.S. policy, see [USCIRF’s May 2010 Annual Report Russia chapter](#).

For more information on the problems with laws against blasphemy or insulting religion, see USCIRF’s Fall 2009 Policy Focus [“The Dangerous Idea of Protecting Religions from ‘Defamation’; A Threat to Universal Human Rights Standards.”](#)

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the

Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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